There Is a Light That Never Goes Out

An Essay on Certainty, Cultivation, and the Work of Reading

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April 2026

In June 2023, a photograph circulated on Facebook of an old pony in a field in Geauga County, and the pattern has stayed with me. The caption said the pony was lying dying on a rural Geauga County corner, barely able to walk because of grossly overgrown hooves. A puppy, the post said, had found a friend in the pony and never strayed far from its side because it could sense the pony's pain. The post suggested that both animals were suffering, that abuse was underway, and asked how much longer it would be before people were looking at carcasses. It also said the Geauga County Humane Officer had been contacted five times without response.

That last claim was technically true and functionally misleading. The contacts had all occurred within roughly an hour, and they had gone to the humane society, the Sheriff, and the county commissioners. What was presented as institutional neglect was the ordinary interval before an investigation could begin. Even the time required to receive a complaint, assess it, coordinate with law enforcement, and go to the property had been recast as indifference.

The post drew hundreds of reactions, nearly five hundred comments, more than three hundred shares, and, within a short time, tens of thousands of views. People called for the humane society to be punished for failing to respond. Some urged others to suspend donations. Others posted that our Humane Officers should leave the donut shop and do their jobs. By that afternoon, strangers were loading trailers and driving to the property to take the pony. A Geauga County Sheriff's Deputy was there turning them away.

The facts on the ground were nothing like the story online. The pony was not dying. His name was Frank. He was elderly, blind in one eye, and had been rescued by a Geauga County farmer who was also a farrier and had already begun the work on his hooves. Frank lived with five other working farm horses, along with other farm animals, and was found to be well-fed, lively, friendly, and loved. The "puppy" in the photograph was a small adult dog, the mother of a litter of puppies in the barn. The dogs had shelter, food, and care. Humane Officers and a Geauga County Sheriff's Deputy were welcomed onto the property. What the photograph captured was the middle of the work, rather than the absence of it.

The middle of care was mistaken for the absence of care.

That is the part that has stayed with me. The middle of care was mistaken for the absence of care. The work was already underway, and because it had not yet reached the form the crowd expected, the crowd read it as failure. They were not unkind people. They were moved by what they understood to be suffering. The post supplied a finished moral picture before the facts had been read. The frame told them to feel, and they felt. The frame told them to accuse, and they accused. The frame told them to act, and some of them began hitching trailers.

The facts on the ground did not become the reality online. Online reality had already become its own thing: a dying pony, a puppy keeping vigil, officials refusing to act, carcasses coming soon. It had villains, witnesses, momentum, and a moral demand. By the time investigators reached the property, they were walking into a story that had already declared itself true.

Unless you learn to read.

I first encountered the discipline required to resist that story in the places where I have spent my adult life: poetry, arts education, reentry work, military history, and animal welfare. The poems in *Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate* came from that environment before I had a philosophy for it. *The Groaning Book* was written later as a way of reading what the poems had already been carrying: the pressure between attention and certainty, between cultivation and performance, between the thing itself and the frame that tries to claim it too quickly.

One section of *The Groaning Book* is called "Certainty as Narcotic." It begins with a man I used to pass at State and Madison in Chicago, preaching condemnation through a microphone with a stack of pamphlets at his side. His voice never wavered. Everyone was guilty for one reason or another. He was issuing verdicts. At the time, he seemed like part of the street's fabric. Now his voice feels familiar. What once seemed fringe has become ambient.

Certainty works like a quick sedative. It numbs doubt and intensifies conviction. It flattens complexity. It trains people to perform knowledge rather than pursue it. A poem under that pressure becomes a pamphlet. Public life under that pressure turns the photograph into a verdict. It tells us what the thing means before the thing has been allowed to appear.

Reading is a form of listening.

Reading is a form of listening. It is the interval in which the thing before us is allowed to speak before the frame speaks for it. A photograph, a sentence, a child, a veteran, a person returning from prison, a creature in a field. Each one asks to be read before being turned into evidence for what we already believe.

Cultivation is the work before the light reaches it. It is the work of helping a person, an institution, an animal, or a community become more capable than it was before. In poetry, it may look like reading, imitation, revision, silence, failure, and the long apprenticeship by which voice becomes more than self-expression. In arts education, it may look like a child being given access to forms and traditions that did not seem to belong to them until someone made the invitation serious. In reentry work, it may look like job readiness, structure, trust, literacy, transportation, housing, employers willing to take a measured risk, and someone staying with the work after the rhetoric has moved on. In military history, it may look like testimony, bearing, command judgment, institutional memory, and the discipline to know the difference between service as formation and service as costume. In animal welfare, it may look like investigation, veterinary care, lawful process, behavior work, foster networks, statutory decisions, and the unglamorous knowledge required to tell suffering from age, neglect from poverty, and cruelty from work already underway.

The public often sees only the moment before completion. The hoof before the farrier's next careful layer of work. The student before the discipline takes hold. The returning citizen before the next habit has become reliable. The institution before its memory has been understood. The poem before its voice has found pressure. The animal before the plan has finished. When the middle of cultivation is mistaken for absence, the crowd attacks the very conditions by which repair becomes possible.

That is one of the hardest forms of freedom.

This is a problem of attention and a problem of equity. The deepest equity work I have known has been arts education and civic cultural work. Art becomes equitable when people are given real access to the disciplines, traditions, materials, permissions, difficulties, and rooms that allow them to make something. A poem. A painting. A song. A performance. A way of seeing. That work is slow. It asks for repetition, correction, imitation, reading, listening, failure, and return. It asks a person to receive something from outside the self without being humiliated by receiving it. That is one of the hardest forms of freedom.

Access matters. Access with cultivation brings people into forms they can enter, question, revise, and eventually transform. A door requires a staircase. Standards require teaching. Inherited forms require invitation, pressure, and use. When standards are treated only as oppression, the already cultivated remain in possession of them while everyone else is offered performance and told it is power.

Arts education is one of the places where this capacity is taught most directly. It asks a person to look again, listen again, revise the first response, tolerate ambiguity, recognize form, and distinguish feeling from judgment. It teaches that meaning arrives through relation, pressure, context, and return. A society that lets those disciplines disappear does not merely produce fewer artists. It produces fewer readers of everything else.

That is why Steven F. Wilson's Atlantic essay, "The Self-Defeating Condescension of an Anti-Racist Education," is painful beyond its immediate political context. Wilson describes charter schools that had been doing what serious equity requires: teaching children, many of them poor, to read difficult books, study history and art, master mathematics, and enter intellectual life with confidence. The schools were providing cultivation. Then the language of justice arrived and renamed parts of that cultivation harm. Discipline became violence. High expectations became cruelty. Inherited cultural material became evidence of domination. The result, as Wilson describes it, was loss. The children who most needed access to cultivation were the ones most directly harmed when cultivation was confused with oppression.

That pattern is larger than one school network. It is a temptation inside any politics that treats creative and intellectual life as a property rather than a practice. Creativity is

shaped by identity, grievance, representation, injury, pride, and access. Those things may become material. They may shape voice. They may create urgency. They still require cultivation. A culture that wants creative life has to build the conditions for it: teachers, elders, archives, rooms, tools, traditions, arguments, permissions, models, standards, and time. It has to help people learn how to make, rather than merely how to claim.

Thomas Chatterton Williams's Atlantic essay, "Theft Is Now Progressive Chic," belongs to the same pattern. The details are almost absurd in their clarity. A New York Times Opinion conversation considered theft from Whole Foods, theft from the Louvre, sabotage, and political violence as though the social contract were optional under the right moral frame. Three public figures said reckless things. Public figures do that every day. The substitution matters. Theft became critique. Sabotage became ethical seriousness. Taking became a political act.

When cultivation weakens, taking begins to look like making. To steal from the Louvre is to possess an object while remaining outside the tradition that made it meaningful. To steal from Whole Foods is to stage appetite as politics. To blow up a pipeline is to borrow the glamour of revolt without cultivating an energy future. These gestures borrow the glamour of rupture without the discipline of building anything that might follow it. They confuse possession with participation. They confuse appetite with imagination. They are hunger dressed as critique.

The crowd is the casualty as much as the actor.

The light operates on multiple fronts at once. The viral post in the morning, the pamphlet on the corner, the swarm shaming the shelter, the conversation glamorizing theft, the costume the appointee puts on, the law built on the emotional force of one case, the school renaming cultivation as harm. The fronts look different. The mechanism is the same: verdict before reading, frame before fact. The lure arrives before the living thing has finished becoming, and the crowd moves toward it because the light is everywhere. What dies is not the pony in the field. The pony is alive. What dies is the faculty by which the pony could have been read as alive: discernment, attention, the interval in which a thing is allowed to speak before the frame speaks for it. The crowd is the casualty as much as the actor. It is being eaten while it believes it is acting. The light of the Devourer does not go out because the medium does not sleep. The next outrage is already loading.

Years ago, I wrote a poem called "The Devourer" that approached this problem before I could have named it this way. The poem gives false light a figure: a faux angel, an empty vacuum with a faint scent others mistake for substance, and finally a creature deep in the ocean whose brilliance draws in what it devours. The poem is a poem rather than a diagram. It carries, in form, the recognition this essay is trying to make in prose. Art is

often where such seeing first becomes available, because art can hold the figure still long enough for a careful reader to meet it.

The right has its own version of the same collapse. It attacks cultivated institutions as captured and replaces formation with performance. Expertise becomes suspect because it belongs to people who know things. Institutional memory becomes weakness. Briefings become optional. Files become part of the machine. Loyalty becomes authority. Costume replaces bearing.

Pete Hegseth's appointment as secretary of defense, now styled by the department as secretary of war, is one expression of that pattern. Hegseth served and deployed. Service and bearing still differ from institutional judgment. A military can honor combat experience while still knowing the difference between someone shaped by command responsibility and someone performing command as posture. The veterans I worked with at the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, combat soldiers whose words I framed in broadsides and whose unit insignia I anchored at the top of each page, would have recognized the distinction instantly. They knew the difference between bearing and performance. They knew the difference between a soldier and Major Burns.

The joke has been promoted into command.

Major Burns was funny because the uniform did not create the authority it claimed. He was officious, brittle, self-serious, and theatrically certain. He mistook proximity to military structure for the inward formation that military structure is supposed to require. He is the Major Burns figure from *M*A*S*H* returned without the mercy of sitcom: the brittle officer whose uniform supplies more authority than his character can carry. The joke has been promoted into command. Outsiders can carry necessary knowledge. This is a problem of mistaking performance for cultivation, and then calling the mistake renewal.

Reentry work teaches the same lesson from another direction. Recidivism is reduced through cultivation rather than slogans about second chances alone. A person returning from prison needs opportunity, and opportunity needs structure under the pressure of old conditions. The work requires job training, documentation, transportation, housing, employers, sobriety supports, case management, trust, consequence, repetition, and time. It requires people willing to believe in change without romanticizing how hard change is. A framework can flatter the public for believing in second chances. Cultivation gives the person returning a ground on which a second chance can actually be practiced.

Animal welfare is the same. Rescue is the complaint taken seriously, the investigation conducted lawfully, the veterinary exam, the foster network, the cruelty statute, the dog bite record, the behavior assessment, the barn visit, the euthanasia decision made under

law rather than emotion, the transfer partner, the person cleaning the kennel, the farrier appointment, the deputy turning away trailers because the crowd has mistaken itself for justice. The viral photograph is the visible spark. The whole work is quiet, technical, and morally heavier than the performance of care.

Creative life has to be grown somewhere by someone.

This is where the cultural question becomes unavoidable. Cultures produce sustained creative life through cultivation rather than identity, injury, pride, or grievance alone. Dominant cultures also carry a responsibility to treat what others have cultivated as more than raw material for their own renewal. Creative life has to be grown somewhere by someone. It has to be carried in families, schools, churches, studios, libraries, workshops, bands, kitchens, theaters, streets, fields, and institutions. It has to be protected long enough to become strong. Then it can enter the general public as gift, argument, influence, challenge, or inheritance.

My own family has lived in the Cuyahoga Valley since 1802, English farmers and Scottish and Scotch-Irish city dwellers, a Midwestern Protestant inheritance in which creative work was often treated as close to sin because it was not considered useful. The paternal line carried that inheritance most plainly. There were no artists to name. The maternal line carried something else. When I went to graduate school to study literature, my civil engineer grandfather thought I was choosing to starve. But, a second great-grandfather's cousin was a working female artist of some note in the 1890s, when women were not supposed to be artists, and her work has moved through the family for more than a century. Some of it hangs on my walls. My mother played the piano and painted. My civil engineer grandfather sang in the choir. Cultivation was permitted on that side, even quietly distinguished. It was not the track I was supposed to take. The track was law or medicine. I found my own work in college, somewhat on my own, and went on from there. Cultivation is often built as an anomaly inside a culture rather than as a representative expression of it. It is also often built in the gap between what one side of a family permits and what the other side expects. Culture matters. Identity matters. History matters. The work still has to be done.

That split inheritance has shaped the dual life I have lived since. I have spent thirty years working for or running not-for-profit institutions, and I have spent the same thirty years making poems. The two lives are not as separate as they look. Both require cultivation. Both ask for attention before frame. The CEO reads the budget, the statute, the case file. The poet reads the line, the photograph, the figure in the field. The discipline is the same. The objects differ. This essay comes from both rooms.

Years ago, a Cleveland executive told me he liked staying in contact because I read books, and because he did not know many people like that anymore. He knew everyone.

I received it less as a compliment than as a civic diagnosis. Reading had become rare enough, even near power, to be treated as a distinguishing trait.

Power has its own failure in this. Actual power has become almost completely self-absorbed. It listens mainly to itself, protects mainly itself, explains mainly itself to itself. For the careful reader, this creates a particular kind of civic despair. One can read the evidence, trace the structure, understand the incentives, identify the damage, and still find no available door through which that understanding can enter public life. Under those conditions, rupture begins to acquire glamour. That recognition is a warning rather than permission.

If reading is a form of listening, listening is also a form of cultivation. To read a photograph, a law, a court ruling, a poem, a child, a veteran, a person returning from prison, or a creature in a field is to let it exist for a moment before the framework takes possession of it. That interval is where judgment begins. Without it, feeling becomes command, ideology becomes permission, and performance becomes proof.

Avery's Law took effect in Ohio on March 20. It grew out of a serious bite case, and no one needs to minimize the injury or the fear behind it. But a law built around the emotional force of one case now governs daily shelter decisions across Ohio. Humane Societies across the state were excluded from the conversation.

They were watching ponies.

For years, shelters have been told by parts of the activist world that euthanasia is always a moral failure: that no animal should lose its life because society failed it, that every hard behavioral decision reflects cowardice, cruelty, or institutional convenience. Those claims have created social media storms, shamed staff, and cost shelters donors. Then a law arrived that made some of those choices less discretionary. Shelters are now euthanizing dogs they once would have given more time. Perhaps that is acceptable. Perhaps it is the necessary consequence of public safety, liability, and the law as written. But after all the shaming, all the finger-pointing, and all the online rage, the activist voices were absent when the structure changed. They were watching ponies.

The cultivators are still here. The teachers who keep teaching. The artists who keep making rooms for others to enter. The reentry workers who keep answering the phone after the speech is over. The veterans who know the difference between bearing and performance. The legislators who actually do their homework. The humane officers who read the animal before reading the crowd. The farriers. The kennel staff. The archivists. The people who hold the photograph still long enough to ask what it actually shows.

They are often quiet because the work is the work, and the work requires attention. The light is elsewhere and always on. It offers the warmth of immediate righteousness and the pleasure of belonging to a frame before the facts have had time to speak.

The man at State and Madison is still preaching somewhere. The Devourer is still glowing in the deep. They are the same figure in different forms. They offer certainty before attention, verdict before reading, brilliance that draws in what it consumes. The middle of care is mistaken for the absence of care every day. It happens to the farrier, the teacher, the case manager, the humane officer, the poet on the fourth revision of a line nobody has yet read. The light is bait. Cultivation is the only thing that has ever held.

About the Author: KC Clarke is the author of *Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate* and *The Groaning Book: A Poetics*, and of *Wolves and Flax: The Prior Family in the Cuyahoga Valley Wilderness*. His professional life has included leadership in literary centers, museums, libraries, and nonprofit institutions, as well as editorial and creative direction for numerous books. He writes from within the civic and cultural infrastructure this essay describes.